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Human Rights: A Primer

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The modern human rights movement began with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. As the movement has grown in the last four decades, most nations have been involved in the formulation of human rights norms. This is a debate that is constantly evolving. Religion is often seen as a force which opposes human rights, but in fact the basic values of human rights are reinforced by the core teachings of the world's religions. The potential of the religions, including Hinduism, to support human rights is vast indeed. But so far in the Hindu community there has not been much discussion of human rights in a specifically Hindu perspective.

The essential idea of "human rights" is that each human being has certain rights simply by virtue of being human. He or she need do nothing to earn these rights or to be qualified to have them. Each person possesses these rights equally with all other persons, since it is not to be thought that one person is more or less "human" than another. As is said in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (and similarly in many other documents), "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political and other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status." The modern ideal of human rights, then, embraces the values of common humanity, equality and nondiscrimination.

The world's religions expand upon modern "human rights" discourse through their emphasis (found everywhere) on duties, responsibilities and obligations, as well as on rights. In theistic traditions, one may speak also of God's "rights," or what is due to God from a given person or group. Religious life has traditionally been

lived in social community, and in social relations there is a symmetry of rights and duties. For any person in a traditional religious community, one's rights, or what one may claim, and one's duty, or what one ought to offer to others, both together constitute a definition of the person's proper role in the whole social and the cosmic order. Religious views of the world and the human condition are by their very nature totalizing. They have enormous importance as a support for human rights not only by reinforcing particular human rights norms with which they resonate, but by providing the inclusive vision, inspiration and moral framework for human rights which may be lacking in more limited accounts, such as documents with a primarily legal purpose.

There are several clear needs for action by religious communities. The first two depend on sustained, well-informed dialogue within religious communities and between adherents of different religions, i.e. both intra-religious and inter-religious dialogues. The purpose of these dialogues should be: 1) to reconfirm human rights norms with which a religion or several religions can agree; and 2) to clearly define which human rights norms are problematic for a religion or religions. Religious representatives should not unrealistically expect to reach consensus on any given question in set periods of time, but should commit themselves to the dialogue itself no matter how long it may take. Religions without exception do need to be self-critical and redefine certain of their own doctrines, values and required practices if these are in conflict with their own more deeply held visions of peace, justice and human dignity. Religious leaders who have access to the media should use this access to support human rights. Religious leaders who have international contacts should strategically use their influence to support human rights. Religious leaders and communities should make a point of supporting the human rights of people who are not of their own religion. Finally, in spite of the noble record of struggle for human rights by many spiritual leaders and communities, religious communities should acknowledge hypocrisy where it exists and seek to close the gap between professed ideals and actual practice. All religions should engage this central spiritual challenge, and exhort their adherents to sincerity, sacrifice and the endeavor of human transformation.

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